THE LAND OF BANISHMENT

THE word "Siberia" was associated in Russia with clanging fetters, marching gangs of convicts with half-shaven heads, exiles languishing in hamlets buried under snow, vagabonds in the mysterious taiga. In contrast, the Siberians considered their land a treasure chest of untapped resources, a land where nature was stern and life austere but full of opportunity and promise.

Siberia is half again as large as the continental United States and comprises half the U.S.S.R. Its northern expanse is practically uninhabitable, but its southern part includes fertile plains in the west and heavily forested plateaus in the center and east.

Fugitives and hunters from Moscovia penetrated into Siberia in the sixteenth century. A century later Russian scouts appeared on the Pacific. Forts were built in the wilderness as defenses against the native nomadic tribes of Mongolian origin, and settlements grew up along the rivers. Then came gangs of convicts, involuntary settlers of the frontier. Many old Siberian families cherished the memory of forefathers who had come to Siberia in fetters and later gave their names to gold mines in the Vitim Mountains or to ships plying the Yenisei and Lena. In the nineteenth century the Cossacks settled along Siberia's southern borders. They were followed by new trains of convicts and peasant settlers. Those who succeeded in the struggle for survival developed a type of farm life rare in European Russia: a large family, frequently including from four to six workers; a farmhouse built of round larch logs twenty inches thick; a courtyard encircled by a fence reminiscent of a stockade; eighty to a hundred acres under the plow and many hundreds more in forests, with fields in the clearings.

In contrast to European Russia, Siberia knew neither seignorial landowners nor serfs—only convicts and free settlers. Intermarriage of peasant settlers and former convicts with natives gave rise to a new race, free from traditions, strong and shrewd, reserved toward strangers. The native tribes of Mongolian origin did not merge entirely with the Russian settlers. Villages of the Buryats remained in the south, and pockets with a Yakut population in central Siberia, while the Tungus roamed the forests farther northwest and Samoyeds camped in the Arctic region.

Siberia has had a colorful political history. Beginning with the seventeenth century, it was ruled by magistrates who combined the features of oriental satraps with those of Roman proconsuls. They